IV || LAURENCE BERNS

Aristotle's *Poetics**

Henry Jackson, the highly respected classical scholar, an editor of some texts of Aristotle, paid the following compliment to Aristotle's *Politics*. "It is an amazing book," he said. "It seems to me to show a Shakespearian understanding of human beings and their ways. . . ." Aristotle, the philosopher, is praised because his understanding of human beings approaches or matches that of Shakespeare, the poet. The poet's understanding is the standard. In this remark, Jackson seems to take it for granted that the poet's understanding of human beings and their ways is somehow the most adequate and most profound understanding. This is not hard for us modern men to understand. For one thing, the poet's picture of the world preserves that wonder and mystery which seem to dissolve and disappear in the accounts of the philosophers and scientists. Furthermore, the great poet convinces us of his knowledge in a much more powerful way than bare argument and reasoning can ever do. His conceptions are constantly put to a practical test—a test of their ability or inability to move man through his emotions.

What kind of power or understanding is it that the great poet possesses? What is it that makes a great work of art so convincing and moving? It could not have been very long after men were first moved by great works of art that they began to reflect on the nature of art and the artist. This is intelligible, for great art fills us with a sense of wonder, wonder about the artist's subject and the artist himself, and, Aristotle informs us, "in wondering is the desire to learn." Today, too, the enormous amount of literature devoted to literary and artistic criticism testi-

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fies to the fact that the desire to understand and learn about great art and artists is just as strong. However, the purpose of art criticism is not only theoretical, to understand the mysterious power of great art, but practical as well, to help artists improve their works and to help us enlarge our capacities to appreciate and enjoy great art.

With such expectations in mind, we turn directly to Aristotle's *Poetics.* What we might provisionally call the fine arts are defined by Aristotle as forms of imitation. The words "creativity," "aesthetics" and "self-expression" do not occur in Aristotle's definition. "Imitation" is the key term. The idea of art as imitation immediately creates a problem for us. It seems to depreciate art. Imitations are secondary or derivative: one need only think of imitation leather, or imitation flavor. Imitations immediately refer us to those more fundamental things of which they are imitations. If art in general is imitation, what does it imitate? Nature is the traditional answer. The phrase "imitation of nature" does not occur in the *Poetics,* but I shall explain later why I think it is what Aristotle meant.

Imitation of nature is often misunderstood, because what Aristotle means by nature is often misunderstood. Imitation of nature does not mean a simple copying of what we happen to find actually existing. Natural things, according to Aristotle, possess certain capacities for development. A thing realizes its nature more, the more it fulfills these capacities, the more it approaches its own specific perfection. Nature, as Aristotle uses the term, includes what ought to be, and imitation of nature means not mere copying of things, but also the imitation of things in their perfection. The artist is enjoined by the doctrine of imitation of nature to look carefully at the real world about him, not in order to copy it, but in order to see that the ideal characters or perfections that he will portray have some basis in the real world, that they are developments of truly existing possibilities and, hence, more convincing. Santayana wrote of Aristotle's conception of human nature: "Everything ideal has a natural basis, and everything natural has an ideal development." Art imitates not only what is actual in nature, but also what is potential in nature.[1]

From this point of view, many of the arguments directed against the doctrine of imitation of nature from the point of view of creativity lose their force. The artist, according to Aristotle, certainly can and ought to portray things which have never actually been known to exist, but to be convincing as works of art, they ought to be things which we know could possibly exist.

We have an indication of what Aristotle means by nature in the brief history of tragedy which he sketches out in the *Poetics.* He speaks of how tragedy first grew out of crude, improvised imitations and slowly

developed and advanced as each of the things which added to its perfection became known. Then he says: "And having gone through many changes, tragedy stopped when it attained its own nature." The perfection, or full development, of the thing is identical with its nature. This understanding of things can still be found implicit in ordinary language; for instance, one can say of a very good play, "Now that really *is* a play," meaning it contains all of what we expect from a play. And we can say of a very bad play, "Do you call that a play?" Or we have to add qualifications like "bad," saying, "That is a bad play," meaning that it lacks those qualities we expect to find in a play. It does not live up to or realize the nature of a play. It is not fully a play. If we follow this thought a bit further, we may get a clue as to why the *Poetics*, which purports at its outset to be a book about poetry in general, is largely taken up with a discussion of tragedy.[2] If the nature of a thing is seen most fully in the perfection of that thing, then the nature of poetry should be seen most fully in the most nearly perfect form of poetry. There is some indication in the *Poetics* that Aristotle regarded tragedy as the most nearly perfect form of poetry. Among the Greeks the two main contenders for the crown of poetry were evidently epic poetry and tragedy. In the final chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that the crown should go to tragedy because it contains everything epic poetry contains and more, and, in addition, it realizes the purpose of poetry more fully.

By pursuing this line of thought even further, we see that Aristotle is concerned in the *Poetics* not with any tragedy, but with the best tragedies, those which provide the models and standards for all other tragedies. It is mostly to Sophocles, Euripides, and Shakespeare that Lessing turns when seeking models to demonstrate the truth of Aristotle's canons for tragedy.

However, things are said to be perfect in two ways, as wholes in themselves and as parts of larger wholes.[3] The latter consideration entails reflection on the function of tragedy within the larger whole of political and social life.

Although the *Poetics* begins with a discussion of poetry in general that lasts for five chapters, this discussion culminates, at the beginning of Book six, with the famous definition of tragedy. The book contains twenty-six chapters, and seventeen of these, chapters 6-22, are devoted to tragedy. The definition of tragedy reads as follows: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete, and of a definite magnitude, with sweetened or pleasing language, each form of which is used separately in the parts of the tragedy. The imitation is done by means of men acting, not through narration, accomplishing through pity and fear the catharsis of such passions." Most of the rest of the book

could be regarded as an analysis of that definition. The definition tells us first what tragedy is in general, namely, imitation. Imitation of what?—of a serious action and an action that is complete and of a definite size. What is the medium used to convey the imitation to its audience?—pleasing or embellished language. How or in what manner is the language presented?—through men acting, not through narration.

Up to this point Aristotle builds on his previous discussion, and discusses only the work of art in itself. But with this statement about the effect, end, function, or purpose of tragedy, something new enters the discussion. What should the tragedy do to or for its audience or readers? By means of pity and fear it should effect a purgation or purification of these kinds of emotion.

This answer is by no means as lucid as the others. Why are pity and fear selected as the key passions? What does catharsis mean? We shall take up the last question first. There is, perhaps, no subject which has divided interpreters of the *Poetics* more. This problem is not only a problem of textual interpretation, but is a reflection of a basic difference of opinion about the fundamental purpose of art and the role of the artist. To put it simply: Is it the primary function of the artist to please, move, and entertain his audience, or should he be a moral teacher?[4] We shall examine the catharsis problem with a view to this larger question.

The word catharsis in Greek means both purgation and purification. Purgation is used here primarily as a medical term in homeopathic medicine. The old theory could be characterized roughly as follows. If the body is suffering, say from an excess of acidity, the physician gives the patient, in some form or another, more acid, which, somehow, causes a reaction to acid that purges away or removes the excess. The removal of the disturbing excess and the return of the body to health are accompanied by a feeling of being lightened or relieved, which is pleasant. Let us apply the theory to tragedy. Those of us with an excess of pity and fear in our souls go to the theater. After feeling fear with and pity for the hero of the tragedy, our excessive pity and fear are drained off, and we experience pleasure from the relief. The production of this special pleasure is said to be the end of tragedy. There are some difficulties which come to mind immediately. First, it would seem that only those who are somewhat sick, suffering from an excess of pity and fear in their souls, can fully benefit from tragedy. One could reply that the poet first arouses pity and fear before purging them away; that is, he first creates the excess so that he can provide the pleasurable relief from the purgation. Yet, as one considers how most appreciative spectators feel after seeing a great tragedy, this theory becomes more and more implausible. Such spectators are not simply drained of emotion, relieved and contented, but stirred and moved by powerful feelings somewhat different

from those they came in with. The purification theory of catharsis is simpler. The artist arouses pity and fear in his audience in order to train them to fear those things which ought to be feared and to pity those things which ought to be pitied. For example, from Sophocles' *Antigone* the spectator might learn to feel that dishonor is more to be feared than death. Purification here means moral purification. As Euripides says, in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, speaking for the poets: "We make men better. . . ." Those who hold strictly to the purgation theory tend to regard the *Poetics* more as a technical treatise.[5] They would tend to argue that Aristotle, the scientist, concentrating on differences in subject matters, freed Western man's understanding of art from the preoccupation with morality which limited the vision of his predecessors, especially Plato. Those who hold to the purification theory say that in fundamentals Aristotle agreed with Plato and held a moral theory of art.[6]

It should be clear that both theories require art to be pleasant, but the status of that pleasure is what is in question. According to what we are calling the pure purgation theory, the great artist has no other aim, as artist, than making a work of art that produces that pleasure in his audience. According to the purification theory, the pleasure is subordinate to, and in the service of, moral improvement. These distinctions correspond to what has been called the difference between pure or autonomous art and didactic art. The other places in Aristotle's writings where the word catharsis occurs are not especially illuminating. In the *Politics*, in the section on music in education, catharsis is discussed in what seems to be the medical sense of purgation.[7] The word occurs only once more in the *Poetics*, and there it clearly means purification, a religious purification from sin.[8] Perhaps the best way out of the difficulty is to try to analyze the whole problem from the beginning.

The more fundamental problem we have in mind is, to repeat, What is the function and purpose of tragedy? By means of pity and fear to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions, Aristotle tells us in chapter six; and in chapter fourteen we are informed that tragedy has its own special kind of pleasure, the pleasure from pity and fear through imitation. Aristotle was not the first man to single out pity and fear as key passions in poetry. In the *Ion*, among other places, Plato touches on the subject.[9] Ion, a man who made his living by reciting epic poems, is being questioned by Socrates about how he most amazes his spectators. Socrates mentions five instances of moving passages in Homer. The first is the scene just as Odysseus is about to kill all of the panic-stricken suitors. The next is Achilles chasing Hector around the wall. Hector, the hero of Troy, is, we know, about to be killed. Our fear for his life is mixed with pity. The next three examples concern Andromache, Hector's wife; Hecuba, his mother; and Priam, his father. Each is more pitiful

than the preceding. In Ion's answering speech, where he describes how moved he is himself when he moves others, the only passions mentioned are pity, terror, and fear. Fortunately, Aristotle has analyzed these passions in his *Rhetoric*; a large part of our discussion will be based on that analysis.

I believe that the order of Socrates' examples was not accidental: fear first, changing to pity. Fear and pity go together, and this is the usual order. As the revelations about Oedipus begin to unfold, we begin to fear that we will learn that he is the murderer, the cursed one. As the evidence comes in and the evil and suffering are upon him, our fear changes to pity. When King Lear strips himself of all his power and puts it in the hands of his unworthy daughters, along with Kent, we fear for the evil approaching him and the country. And when that evil has arrived, the fear has transformed itself into pity for his suffering. Fear, Aristotle says, is a kind of pain or trouble from the imagination of an imminent evil, a deadly or painful evil. Fear is different from grief. We grieve when some very painful evil has already happened. A sense of urgency goes along with fear; while we still fear there is hope of escape. Perhaps the old shepherd will assure Oedipus that Laius was killed by a band of robbers, not one man and not Oedipus himself. Perhaps Lear will pay heed to Kent's warning or his Fool's prodding. Pity, according to Aristotle, is a kind of pain which comes from the occurrence of a manifest evil to someone else who does not deserve it. Or, to use the shortened formula of the *Poetics*, we feel pity for someone who suffers undeserved misfortune. As hope dies out and we see suffering coming on, our initial fear, the fear for what is about to happen to the tragic hero, transforms itself for the most part into pity.

Pity and fear are connected in another way. Fear is felt primarily for ourselves or those who are very close to us and then for those who are like ourselves. And all of those things which men fear will happen to themselves they can pity when they happen to others. This suggests that there is no pity without fear[10] though there can be fear without pity. Thus, the fear allied with pity, a more generalized fear stemming from the entire course of action imitated by the plot, can be distinguished from the initial fear of the specific disaster approaching the tragic hero. And so we move from this initial fear to a fear of the causes of such events. Pity, here, is to be distinguished from what Aristotle calls humaneness or fellow-feeling, which is not necessarily painful and does not involve a sense of justice.[11]

What Aristotle says in the *Poetics* about fear being aroused by terrible things happening to one who is like ourselves seems to correspond to what in modern psychological terms would be called identification. The tragic hero must be sufficiently like ourselves to enable us somehow to

conceive of ourselves undergoing his or a similar fate. Otherwise, we will not be able to fear the impending disaster, enjoy the suspense, and receive the full effect of the tragedy. What is implied is that in order fully to experience a great tragedy, an act of imagination is required. The spectator must be able, in a sense, to imagine himself in the tragic situation. The presentation of a drama on the stage can be more moving than the reading of the drama, for since the evil and the suffering are brought right before our eyes less imagination is required. But according to Aristotle, spectacle, though it is able to lead on the soul, is hardly a concern for the poet. The pity and fear should be built into the incidents of the plot, so that they are felt also by readers, who, with the poet's help, are able to rely on their own imaginations. In chapter twenty-six of the *Poetics,* Aristotle indicates that the great poet places a higher value on his reading audience than on his seeing audience.

The conditions of pity and fear, then, play a large role in determining the character of the tragic hero. He must not be so good that it is impossible to imagine what it would be like to be in his position nor so bad as to forfeit our active pity. He does terrible things, but not out of baseness, because we would not pity the suffering he undergoes for his errors if they stemmed from baseness. On the other hand, if he did and suffered terrible things simply from bad luck or by chance, it would be sad, but not very frightening. It becomes really frightening when the terrible things he does and suffers result from some natural cause, some flaw in his nature, a flaw that is likely to be found in all natures like his—which means in our natures too, insofar as we are like him, or would like to be like him. His flaw prevents him from foreseeing the evil consequences that will result from his actions. Or, it betrays him into becoming an instrument for evil men. That he does not intend or foresee evil is shown by the misery and remorse he undergoes when the evil is recognized by him. His sense of guilt and repentance is our sign that he was not fundamentally malicious and thus entitles him to our pity.[12] Yet his suffering is not meaningless. He is partly responsible for being the kind of man he is. It is both just and frightening that his lack of self-knowledge can be atoned for only through suffering. The tragic hero is generally a man in a very high position, not only because every fall must be from a height, and the higher the height the harder the fall, but because the fates and fortunes of many more people are involved with the errors of men in great positions; hence, the disasters they bring about are more frightening, and their sufferings and sense of guilt are usually greater. The life of every Theban is affected by Oedipus' and Antigone's doings. All England is plunged into war as a result of Lear's mistakes. Also, what happens to our betters is more frightening because, as Aristotle notes

in the *Rhetoric*, those who are able to harm our betters are more able to harm us.[13]

One reason the great tragedians have concentrated on the passions of pity and fear, Aristotle's analysis suggests, is that they were aware that these two passions were better adapted for safeguarding and improving morality and religion than any others. What passion moves most men more readily than fear? What or who are those most fearful beings which, because they are able to harm and humble our betters, are more able to harm us? To speak in the vein of Greek tragedy and King Lear, the answer would be the gods. The gods are the guarantors of public morality. The epic and tragic poets, by showing how even the most lofty can be brought down by the gods, help to instill in people a proper fear of those gods. Pity tends to instill in us a sensitivity to the sufferings of others, and thus renders us less apt to harm others.

The best tragic plots, Aristotle tells us, are those wherein the sufferings are inflicted by and occur among loved ones and the hero discovers what he has done only after it is too late to remedy it. As a result of a flaw natural to his kind, the tragic hero harms and destroys those he loves most. It is those very qualities for which he is admired and honored that cause him to wreak great evils. Furthermore, the more noble the character of the tragic hero, the more dreadful is his suffering when he realizes what he has done. All of this leads to the impression that in some frightful and pitiable way human excellence and mankind's noblest aspirations are inextricably linked with evil. As this impression makes itself felt both in the tragic hero and in his audience, a certain sense of guilt naturally arises, a sense of guilt that comes close to being a sense of original sin. Tragic pity and fear might be thought of as the human roots of the sense of sin.

The connection of pity and fear in tragedy is important in still another way: the two passions tend to purify each other.[14] Terror, Aristotle tells us, casts out pity. It tends to fill us with a selfish and narrow concern for our own safety. The tragedy, by linking our fear with pity for the tragic sufferer, tends to prevent our fear from degenerating into narrow selfishness. On the other hand, the characteristic vice of pity is to degenerate into a loose or morbid sentimentality. By linking pity with things which are really frightening as well, and by inviting us to play at sitting in judgment upon his characters, the poet teaches us to pity things really worth pitying. Tragic pity is the basis of true charity.

John Milton may have had these things in mind when he recommended the study of Aristotle's *Poetics*: "This would make them [students] soon perceive what despicable creatures our common-rhymers and play-writers be; and show them what religious, what glorious and magnificent use

might be made of poetry, both in divine and human things."[15] The purification and purgation interpretations of catharsis do not necessarily contradict each other. In the light of the foregoing analysis, catharsis would be fundamentally purification. But, by arousing pity and fear and by leading them toward objects worthy of them, the poet purges these passions of their unhealthy elements. Pity and fear are purified into a kind of humane reverence or awe.

Seen in this light, the *Poetics* could be regarded as the primary source for the Aristotelian analysis of piety and religion. Since religion, for Aristotle as well as Plato, is a political matter, the *Poetics* would have to be regarded as, in a sense, a political book.[16] The perfection of a tragedy then is also to be determined by how well it functions in taming the pride of the powerful and, in general, elevating the moral sense—the sense of justice—of the political community.

Although purification may be the poet's chief aim, the largest part of his audience comes mainly to be pleased or entertained. Unless the poet pleases, he will have little opportunity to purify. We are still faced by the problem of understanding tragic pleasure. The pleasure proper to tragedy, Aristotle tells us, is the pleasure from pity and fear through imitation. But pity and fear are forms of pain. If it is not contradictory, it certainly is paradoxical to speak of a pleasure from pain. What this indicates is that the pleasure appropriate to tragedy is a very complicated phenomenon. We shall try to distinguish some five constituents of that pleasure.

A Hobbesian might argue that the pleasure comes from a somewhat malicious satisfaction at being free from the miseries we see engulfing others. But this is not sufficient; it hardly does justice to the feeling of elevation that seems to be a part of the pleasure from tragedy.

Aristotle, however, speaks of the pleasure from pity and fear through imitation. Imitation is the most natural thing in the world for men. All men as children first learn how to get on in the world through imitation. There is no one who is not familiar with the pleasure from a successful imitation. We learn from imitation, and though study may be hard, the actual learning itself is naturally pleasant. Learning is most pleasant for all men according to Aristotle. In the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, he says we get pleasure from something that has been well imitated, even if that which has been imitated is itself not pleasant, for it is the reasoning, the inferences connecting the imitation with the object imitated, the learning, that is pleasant.[17] Art which cannot communicate, which cannot represent or imitate, also cannot teach and cannot appeal to those things in our nature which gave rise to art in the first place.

But does not the character of the things imitated also contribute something to the pleasure? We learn through suffering, say the poets. But

through the tragedies, safe in our seats, or at our desks, we learn about things which could otherwise be learned only through suffering them. By playing at suffering we learn and are, so to speak, rescued from the suffering that would normally accompany such learning. Also, is not the pleasure from tragedy more intimately involved with the great sufferers themselves? Perhaps the fact that the suffering and sufferers are great may account for the feeling of exaltation mentioned earlier. The characters, Aristotle says, should be better and usually more illustrious than we are. We experience a sense of exaltation from being admitted into a kind of intimacy with the great, and perhaps even beyond that, a feeling that we have somehow been brought nearer to the greatest powers of all, the powers controlling all human destiny, all nature.

Also, if the function of the poet is, as Aristophanes' Euripides says, to make men better, to purify and educate their passions, the pleasure from learning through playing at great suffering would also contain a certain satisfaction based on the sense of having been made better.

The last constituent of the pleasure from tragedy we should like to mention is that rooted in wonder. Tragic heroes are generally better than we are. They are usually men from whom we expect exemplary conduct—consider Othello, Coriolanus, Lear, Macbeth, Oedipus. They are, in a sense, exemplary and noble, and yet they come to do terrible things. "How all too riddling and unclear is everything you say," Oedipus says to Tiresias. "Are you not best at finding out riddles?" Tiresias answers. "Yes taunt me in those things where you will find me great," is the reply. "Indeed this very luck has destroyed you," Tiresias answers. The very things which make the tragic hero great cause him to wreak great evils and in the end destroy him. This is something not only to be feared and pitied, but also something to be wondered at. The best plots, full of suspense, arouse our wonder, and, Aristotle explains, "to wonder is pleasant for the most part, for in wondering is the desire to learn." The best plots, wondrous, though tragic, are also pleasant, because they offer a promise of and invitation to further learning.

Earlier we spoke of poetic imitation as imitation of nature, and mentioned that the phrase "imitation of nature" occurs nowhere in the *Poetics*. It does occur in other writings of Aristotle, but chiefly in reference to the useful arts. However, it is clearly implied, almost clearly stated, in what Aristotle says about a good plot or myth. The plot is the controlling element, as it were, the soul of the tragedy. The plot, he says, following Plato's *Phaedrus*, should be an organic whole. The composition or synthesis of the incidents should end up in the formation of one overall action. The plot is the direct imitation of such an action. There ought to be nothing superfluous, nothing whose absence or displacement would

not change the unity of the whole. What is a whole? Aristotle's answer seems absurdly simple: that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is not so simple. The beginning need not be connected with any other events by necessity; it may come about by chance. But it must be followed by events which develop *naturally* out of it. The middle comes after such events. And from the middle, events follow naturally either by necessity or for the most part leading up to the end or completion. What we have here is a three-fold classification of events which also occurs elsewhere in the works of Aristotle. Things come about either always in the same way, by necessity; or they come about usually in the same way, so that we say it will probably be or it is likely to be this way. We cannot say that events in the latter class always come about in the same way, because sometimes in this class things happen in an unusual way, contrary to what is likely. These unusual and unexpected events are chance events. The three kinds of events, then, are (1) those which occur by necessity, (2) those which are probable or occur for the most part, or usually, and (3) those which occur by chance.

Chance events, as chance events, are essentially unintelligible or irrational according to Aristotle. We can know in general why there are such things as chance events, but the chance element in the events themselves is essentially unintelligible.[18] We can have genuine knowledge only of those things which are or come to be by necessity and for the most part and those things are identified in the *Poetics* with what comes about naturally. What comes about naturally is susceptible to rational explanation. (We can make valid universal statements about what exists or comes into being by necessity, and valid general statements about what comes into being for the most part.) Chance is ruled out of the best plots, according to Aristotle. The great poet conquers chance, intellectually and imaginatively. There should be an intelligible reason for everything which happens from beginning to end. The length of the story cannot be any chance length, but one appropriate to the action. And it is necessary, Aristotle says, for the characters, as for the connection of incidents in the plot, to act in accordance with necessity or likelihood. From this we can understand Aristotle's strange remark that poetry is more philosophical than history. It is strange because Aristotle, a philosopher, is naturally concerned with the truth, and history aims at the truth, while poetry is manifestly fiction and Homer is praised for knowing how to tell lies well. The reason that poetry is more philosophical than history is that history, which deals with what actually happened, must also include what happened by chance, what happened for no intelligible reason. Poetry, by excluding chance, is more rational, more meaningful, than history. For the same reason, it is more meaningful than real life. Plots based on chance events are not convincing, they

are episodic; we do not learn from them and are consequently less pleased by them.

Lessing has made a distinction between the poetic genius and the great poetic wit. Genius, he says, loves simplicity, wit complication. "Genius is only busied with events that are rooted in one another, that form a chain of cause and effect." Wit, he says, is concerned with events that just happen at the same time; it thrives on invention and shock, on throwing us so rapidly from one surprise to another, that we do not have time to consider the improbability of the whole action. But with every step taken by the personages invented by a poetic genius, "we must acknowledge that we should have taken it ourselves under the same circumstances and the same degree of passion, and hence nothing will repel us but the imperceptible approach to a goal from which our imagination shrinks, and where we suddenly find ourselves filled with a profound pity for those whom a fatal stream has carried so far, and full of terror at the consciousness that a similar stream might also thus have borne ourselves away to do deeds which in cold blood we should have regarded as far from us."[19] The irrational, then, should be excluded as much as possible from a plot, Aristotle says. However, irrationalities, which include stories about the gods and supernatural contrivances, must be introduced, sometimes out of deference to what most men assert and find convincing and sometimes in order to arouse the sense of wonder.[20] But even irrationalities or things which happen by chance will be more wondrous if they seem to be in accordance with natural human desires, if they appear to fit into some rational and providential design, like the statue of Mitys which fell upon and killed the man who was the cause of Mitys' death.

But the best way to arouse the sense of wonder is to have the events inspiring pity and fear come into being in a way that runs counter to accepted opinion and expectation, and yet in such a way that the events come about on account of one another. As Samuel Butcher put it, it is the combination of the unexpected with the inevitable.[21] In this passage, near the end of chapter nine of the *Poetics*, we can see how closely the understanding of the great poet approaches that of the philosopher. Philosophy, both Plato and Aristotle say, begins in wonder and begins with common opinion and the awareness of its inadequacy. The great poet arouses our wonder by presenting events which run counter to common opinion and expectation. He who is willing to part company with common opinion, to look deeper and harder at those wondrous events, will be rewarded by the discovery of a marvelously lucid, though hidden, chain of natural causes.[22] It must have been such an understanding of poetry that led Plutarch to speak of poetry as a kindly and intimate friend leading young men into the presence of philosophy.[23]

Tragedy exists not only as a part of political life, a part of the political whole. Its perfection is also to be determined by how it functions in relating the life of man to the larger all-comprehensive whole, to nature.[24]

It is through the turn-about or reversal of the protagonist's fortune and his recognition or discovery of who has brought on the tragedy that the fear, surprise, pity, and wonder arise, Aristotle says. The tragic effect is attained most successfully when the actions undertaken by the protagonist, which bring about his downfall and remorse, destroy or ruin those closest to him, his loved ones, his immediate family. But who can be closer to a man than himself? Oedipus has not only destroyed his father and his wife and mother, he has destroyed himself as a political man. Lear has not only brought on the destruction of his daughters, he has destroyed himself as a political man.

In the best plots, like that of the *Oedipus*, Aristotle says, and like *King Lear*, we suggest, the reversal and recognition are conceived so as to develop out of the incidents of the plot at the same time in an organic unity. That is to say, the recognition should take place at that most poignant time when the tragedy is seen to be inevitable, when that hope on which the suspense is based is decisively frustrated and the initial fear is relieved, transforming itself into pity. Oedipus' most important discovery is the discovery about himself. Lear finally learns who does and does not love him. But in order to learn that he is loved for what he is, not for what he has, he has had to strip himself of all worldly and non-worldly powers and protections. Cordelia's experience prefigured Lear's: it was only after she had been stripped of all wealth and power that the difference between the false love of Burgundy and the noble love of France could be discovered. "Gods, Gods!" France says about Cordelia, "'tis strange that from their coldest neglect my love should kindle to inflamed respect." What Aristotle says about the conjunction of reversal and discovery in the best plots points, we suggest, to what may be the highest theme of tragedy, namely, what sacrifices men must make for the sake of self-knowledge.

It could be argued that King Lear is not a very good illustration of Aristotelian poetic principles, for unity of plot is the central consideration for Aristotle, and in Lear we have the unfolding of two related but not unified lines of action: the story of the house of Lear and the story of the house of Gloucester. The unity of the two lines of action can be seen, we suggest, in the unity of the philosophic theme underlying them. As Harry Jaffa has pointed out,[25] the Lear story illustrates the natural limits of political and legal authority. The natural force of noble love cannot be commanded or controlled by any political or conventional authority. The Gloucester story and perhaps the stories of Goneril and

Regan as well illustrate exactly the other side of the coin: how the natural force of ordinary, or physical, love needs to be bounded by the law, by political authority. Edmund was conceived in adultery. Because he is illegitimate he is banished from the family circle. He is devoid of family-feeling. He is an "unnatural" son. Gloucester pays dearly for his transgression of the law.[26] The Lear story points to the tension or opposition between nature and convention; the Gloucester story points to the need for cooperation between nature and convention, how human nature has to be completed by the legislative art.

There are grounds for thinking that Sophocles himself adhered to a conception of tragedy not far from that of Aristotle.[27] Sophocles, it seems, has always been regarded as the master craftsman of plot and character formation. Yet the plot of his *Ajax* seems strangely out of joint.[28] The story builds up with great dramatic intensity to a climax with the suicide of Ajax. If considerations of dramatic effect alone were to prevail, one would expect the play to end there, but it continues for roughly one-third of the play's entire length with a large part of that time devoted to rather mean wrangling between Teucer, Ajax' brother, and Agamemnon and Menelaus about whether Ajax' corpse is to have an honorable or dishonorable burial. Odysseus, Ajax' chief enemy, persuades Agamemnon and Menelaus to allow Ajax an honorable burial. Odysseus, because of his powers of reflection, his power to generalize from the fate of Ajax, and his power to apply his generalizations successfully, rises above the hate, enmity, and pride gripping all the other characters in the play. In the first part of the play, he seems to show his superiority to the goddess Pallas Athene, the conqueror of the hero, Ajax. In the last undramatic one-third of the play, he shows his superiority to all the other human characters. The last undramatic one-third of the play would appear to indicate that Odysseus' superiority, fundamentally an intellectual superiority, is essentially untragic, essentially undramatic.[29]

|| *Notes*

1. Cf. *Poetics* 1451[a] 37–38, 1451[b] 5, 1460[b] 34–36.

2. Another book, or section, on comedy is said to be lost.

3. Cf. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* II–II Q. 184, A. 1, ad. 2; A. 3; A. 4.

4. We shall provisionally use the term "purgation theory" to refer to the former position and "purification theory" to refer to the latter.

5. Cf. Aristotle's *Poetics,* translation and analysis by Kenneth A. Telford (Chicago: Gateway, 1961), pp. 59 ff. However, Telford's interpretation of catharsis differs from those we have sketched out in one crucial respect; see pp. 103–104, and cf. note 12 below.

6. E.g., Jean Racine, *Phèdre,* Préface, the last paragraph.

Socrates' criticism of the poets in Book ten of the *Republic,* in our opinion, is not meant to be taken simply at face value. The best city, according to Socrates in the *Republic,* is the city according to nature. Yet in the *Republic* there is a deliberate and systematic depreciation and distortion of everything strictly private, of everything in human nature that does not directly pertain to justice or philosophy. Those distortions, it has been suggested, serve the purpose of alerting the critical reader to those aspects of human nature which will always interfere with the perfection of justice and philosophy. Just as the power and significance of family feelings are minimized in books five and seven, so are those elements in our nature which call for tragedy and comedy minimized in Book ten. These distortions would seem to compel the critical reader to try to think his way to a more adequate appreciation of what Socrates has deliberately distorted.

There is in such natures as ours, Socrates suggests to Glaucon, a certain tenderness or gentleness which from the perspective of citizen-virtue alone (τὸ δοκοῦν ἀληθές, 607^{c} end, see also 607^{a} end) has no place. Tragedy, through pity, caters to and nourishes this part of human nature. Unalloyed citizen-virtue requires a certain harshness or toughness that practice in pitying might tend to dissolve. Pity has no place in the soul of guardians and soldiers in the best city.

In going on to speak of the temptations from comedy, Socrates shifts from "we" to "you" (sing.). Glaucon is particularly susceptible to such temptations, Socrates is not. While the passions nourished by comedy are not explicitly singled out as pity is for tragedy, Glaucon's character (357^{a}, 372^{c} 2–374^{b} 3, 468^{b} end–468^{c} 4) and Socrates' remarks (606^{d}) suggest to us that anger and lust are the chief passions here. These arguments could be interpreted as providing materials for arguments about the legitimate and proper function of tragedy and comedy within civil society.

There are certain private psychic needs whose satisfaction civil life cannot provide for, and further, which come into conflict with the requirements of civil life. Institutions are required in all states other than Socrates' Republic to gratify and to temper, civilize, or purify those parts of our souls. Tragedy's task is to soothe, civilize, and purify the gentler element, and comedy is to do primarily the same for anger and lust. Shakespeare's Angelo in *Measure for Measure* best exemplifies, insofar as we know, how anger (moral indignation) and lust can work together, feed on and reinforce each other. Comedy then should aim at making characters like Angelo impossible.

7. 1341^{b} 33 ff. See also 1339^{b} 11–1340^{b} 19.

8. 1455^{b} 15.

9. 535^{b}, 535^{c}.

10. I.e., that our pity is always associated with a fear that what happened to the one we pity could have happened or could happen to us. Cf. Sophocles *Ajax* 11. 118–133 and 1355–1373.

11. Butcher explains his translation of τὸ φιλάνθρωπον (*Poetics* 1453^{a}) as "moral sense." (*Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* [New York: Dover, 1951], note, p. 303.) Our interpretation follows Lessing, *Hambürgische Dramaturgie,* nos. 75 and 76, translated as *Dramatic Notes in Lessing's Prose Works* in the Bohn's Standard Library edition. (Reprinted as *Hamburg Dramaturgy* [New York: Dover, 1962].) According to this interpretation, τὸ φιλάνθρωπον, literally "love (or friendship) for mankind," is a more elementary or primitive phenomenon (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155^{a} 16 ff.), akin to the fellow-feeling of birds and beasts for members of their own species. The sense of justice presupposed by Aristotle's definition of tragic pity could exist, as tragedy itself, only in a rather highly developed form of political society. Cf. Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: the Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 367–371.

12. Cf. Gerald F. Else, *op. cit.*, pp. 373, 378–383, note 54, 438–439.

13. For the problem of the tragic hero and modern life, see William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays,* the chapter on Coriolanus; *Round Table,* "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive"; and especially Winston S. Churchill, *Thoughts and Adventures,* "Mass Effects in Modern Life."

14. Cf. Butcher, *op. cit.*, pp. 265–266, and Lessing, *op. cit.*, no. 78.

15. Quoted from his essay *On Education*; cf. the prologue to *Samson Agonistes* and *The Reason of Church Government Urged against Prelaty,* Introduction to Book II.

16. This assertion would appear to be contradicted by Aristotle's statement that correctness in politics and correctness in poetry are not the same (1460^{b} 14–15). The statement may mean little more than that the kind of man and action that makes for a good ruler is different from the kind of man and action that makes for a good tragic hero. This is implicit clearly in the notion of the tragic flow, among other things, and in the differences between the ends of the poetic and political arts. What we are suggesting is that in certain decisive respects the understanding that enables one man to portray a tragic hero well is the same as the understanding that enables another man to practice the art of governing well. Also, that two arts serve some ends that are different in no way prevents them from serving other ends that are the same nor from being subordinate to the same overall end. Furthermore, Aristotle, we suggest, used the word politics in more than one sense, a broad and a narrow sense. In *Politics,* 1322^{b} 17, he speaks of the care of religion and of the priesthood as being a kind of office different from political offices like those of the police, judiciary, executive, and the military. Yet, he asserts, the priesthood and religion are necessary for the political community and are common concerns of

the entire *polis* (1322^{b} 30–32, 1328^{b} 2–24, 1329^{a} 27–36, 1330^{a} 8 and 9). Religion and poetry are not political in the sense of being directly concerned with the everyday administration of governmental affairs. They are political in the more fundamental sense of determining the habits, ideals, and moral sense of the community, the way of life which determines the pattern of the administration of the laws, and sometimes the pattern of the laws themselves. The poets and writers are teachers of legislators. (See Plutarch's *Parallel Lives,* the lives of Lycurgus, Solon, and Alexander; and Rousseau, *The Social Contract* II, Ch. 7, the chapter on the legislator.) They are in this sense "legislative." The distinction between the political art in the narrow sense and the architectonic legislative art (*νομοθετικὴ*) is drawn in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141^{b} 23 ff. Cf. also *Poetics* 1450^{b} 4–8. Politics and poetics differ also in that poetics deals with those things in our nature which are both beneath and beyond politics. It aims, or should aim, at civilizing politics.

(Since this writing the following texts have come to my attention: Alfarabi's *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle,* trans. and ed. Muhsin Mahdi [New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962], pp. 43–47, 92–93; and *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook,* ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi [Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1963]. In the latter volume, consider Roger Bacon's discussion on pp. 376–388.)

17. Cf. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* I–II. Q. 27, A. 1, ad. 3. Cf. also II–II. Q. 145, A. 2, and II–II. Q. 180, A. 2, ad. 3.

18. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140^{a} 18 ff., *Metaphysics* 1027^{a} 14, 1032^{a} 20–23, 1036^{a} 9.

19. Lessing, *op. cit.,* no. 32.

20. Also cf. *Poetics* 1460^{b} 33–1461^{a} 1.

21. Butcher, *op. cit.,* p. 267.

22. At such a stage uncertainty, hope, fear, and pity would be completely purged.

23. Cited by Butcher, *op. cit.,* pp. 217–218.
Thus the *Politics* would appear to be that book of Aristotle's which comes closest to dealing with one of the key questions of Martin Heidegger's thought: the question, stated in non-Heideggerian terms, of how fear, tragedy, and natural piety contribute to the establishment of the mood, or disposition, out of which philosophy develops.

24. Cf. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* II–II. Q. 182, A. 2.

25. Harry V. Jaffa, "The Limits of Politics: An Interpretation of *King Lear,* Act I, Scene I," *American Political Science Review* (June 1957), pp. 405–427.

26. *King Lear* V. iii. 170–175.

27. See H. D. F. Kitto, *Sophocles–Dramatist and Philosopher* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

28. See H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (New York: Anchor, 1954), pp. 124–129, and *Form and Meaning in Drama* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), Ch. 6. R. C. Jebb offers a part "historical" explanation and part apology in his Introduction to the *Ajax* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1896), pp. 28–45.

29. Consider also Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus*. The counterpart to Odysseus and Theseus in *King Lear* would appear to be Edgar.